Still He Delayed • Parshat Vayera

"He who hesitates is lost," goes the well-known proverb. I heard this as a teenager for the first time and wondered what it meant. I get lost when I don't know directions. I don't get lost when I take too long to make a decision. Or do I?

There's an incredible moment in Parshat Vayera that happens just as the sun is about to rise. It's the time of day when possibility opens, when another morning is about to unfold and with it, a sense of limitlessness. It's the moment that explains why he who hesitates is lost. Tentativeness can make us unsure of who we are. Our indecision can make us feel untethered. It is at this liminal hour when Lot was approached by an angel with an important message: he told Lot to save himself and his family from the catastrophe about to plague Sodom and Gemorrah:

> As dawn broke, the angels urged Lot on, saying, "Arise, take your wife and your two remaining daughters, lest you be swept away because of the iniquity of the city." Still he delayed. (Gen. 19:15-16)

Lot ignored the metaphor of the dawn. With doom on the horizon but the glimmer of light that this day could be di erent for him and those he loved, "still he delayed." Rashi writes that Lot delayed to save his property, putting money above his life and that of his family. Radak, a medieval French commentator, expands on this reading. In Genesis 19:12, at an earlier stage, the angel permitted Lot to take what he could with him. As time passed, every hour became increasingly consequential. Lot was forced to forego his possessions and leave at dawn with only the clothing on his back. Hesitation has its costs. Still Lot wasn't ready.

di erent. He could have been heir to Abraham and the next leader of a new nation. Instead, he fathered two sons through incest who grew into two nations that were arch enemies of the Jews. There are long-term implications of inaction.

Several years ago, management consultant and bestselling writer Ron Carucci wrote that, "Too many leaders avoid making tough calls" ("Leaders, Stop Avoiding Hard Decisions," *Harvard Business Review*, April 13, 2018). He conducted a 10-year longitudinal study of more than 2,700 leaders and found that 57% of new executives confronted decisions that were "more complicated and di cult than they expected." As a result, many leaders make excuses for not making hard decisions because they don't want to lose status with followers. Carucci boils down these excuses into three common phrases:

"*I'm being considerate of others*" is a catch-all statement of avoidance. Leaders put o decisions because morale is low, yet it usually gets lower when those in charge evade honest conversations; this only leads to greater dysfunction. Ignoring problems to avoid disappointing people also means putting o creative solutions and leaving those very people "demoralized and confused by their leader's deceit." Decision that should have been made weeks, months, or years ago have been intentionally avoided.

"I'm committed to quality and accuracy." Some leaders have di culty making decisions that have a long-term impact because not knowing outcomes generates high levels of anxiety. They fear looking stupid, Carucci observes, so they ask for more data or seek prolonged consultations. They often ask too many people. "Taking action in the face of incomplete data," Carucci writes, "is an executive's job. You sometimes won't know if the decision was 'right' until long after it's made." When leaders avoid hard decisions because of these factors, they communicate that looking right is more important than doing what's right.

"I want to be seen as fair." It's not hard to understand why leaders want to be seen as caring and just. To avoid playing favorites, however, they risk creating environments where everyone is praised equally or no one is. This, Carucci argues, is also unfair and disrespectful. High performers need acknowledgement if you want great organizations. People who underperform also need to know, even if some di cult decisions and conversations follow.

When leaders repeatedly make excuses for inaction, they are, in e ect, telling others that self-interest and self-protection are more important than the organization, the family, or others in their orbit. When Lot and his family were forcibly brought outside Sodom, they were not subtle in their demand: "'Flee for your life! Do not look behind you, nor stop anywhere in the plain; flee to the hills, lest you be swept away.' But Lot said to them, 'Oh no, my lord! You have been so gracious to your servant and have already shown me so much kindness in order to save my life; but I cannot flee to the hills, lest the disaster overtake me, and I die'" (Gen. 19:17-19).

Once again, Lot made excuses. Even when given another chance, he could not commit and, thus, brought doom to his family. On some level, Lot never truly left Sodom. In *Morality*, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks writes, "Moral hazard occurs when one party is involved in risktaking, but knows that, should the decision turn out to be a bad one, someone else will pay the price. When this happens, there is a distortion in the decision-making process." Lot's distortion had immense moral implications for his family and eventually for our history.

Abraham picked up his life, changed it for the good, and changed the known world as a result. Lot, however, ended his life in ignominy. Ambivalence is rarely neutral. Indecision is also a decision. It's a decision to abdicate responsibility. It does make us feel lost. Yet every day, we wake up to a new dawn and the new decisions dawn brings. With each rising sun, we have another chance to rise, to shine, and to make better choices.